

Creating Instructions for a Cross-Cultural Audience

A Collaboration with Students in Trieste, Italy

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Introduction

The core principles of technical writing and communication (TWC) and web design are critical when creating online materials for a cross-cultural audience.

The purpose of this document is to explain the process of creating an effective online instruction set for use and translation by students in Italy. This project was completed in the WRIT 3562W class at the University of Minnesota, under the instruction of Professor Brandi Fuglsby.

As the technical communicator in this project, I was able to apply the TWC principles I've learned throughout my coursework to a real-life situation, and for an audience that lives amongst a different culture, and for whom English is not their first language.

Rhetorical Situation

The theme that was chosen for the instruction set was, *how to run for beginners*. The theme and the instructions were guided by the five components of the specific rhetorical situation.

- **Purpose:** Inform the audience of the basic steps needed to run while also promoting Nike products.
- **Genre:** Instruction set presented on a website.
- **Audience:** Nike customers and potential Nike customers who are interested in learning how to run.
- **Style:** Conversational style where the emphasis is placed on the reader rather than the author.
- **Context:** The instructions will be used during the reader's free time, both inside and outside of their home. They will access them both before and after they run.

Audience: Italian Students in Trieste, Italy

This project included collaboration with two students studying Applied Interlinguistic Communication at the University of Trieste in Trieste, Italy.

Throughout the project, I maintained consistent communication with my Italian partners using email, video chat, and text messaging. All three forms of communication were effective, but I did notice cultural differences during our communications.

For example, the Italian students did not do school work on the weekend. This meant that all correspondence needed to be conducted in advance, during the week. It was important that I adapted to this difference so that our communications remained effective. Further, my Italian partners differed from me in that they spoke several languages and opted to travel before attending University. These differences meant that they brought a unique perspective when critiquing the instructions.

Methods

Content Creation

The content for the instruction set was created using the core TWC principles of clarity, accuracy, and conciseness. To make the instructions clear, each step was described using simple language, avoiding metaphors, slang, and other symbols that might have carried different meanings in other cultures (Rimondi, 2015). To maintain accuracy, I used my own knowledge of the subject and consulted subject matter experts, such as Nike, as needed. Lastly, to ensure conciseness, I kept the instructions brief and each of the steps short. This allowed the readers to quickly understand what actions needed to be taken.

Web Design

The instructions were presented on a website to aid both their accessibility and usability. Because the instructions were meant for an audience outside of the United States, it was imperative that they be presented on a platform that was widely available and easily accessible. However, to successfully apply the core principles of web design to a project meant for a cross-cultural audience I focused on four main areas, creating a clear hierarchy of information, implementing white space, establishing a balance of content and images, and creating effective navigation.

1. Hierarchy of Information

Using contrasting colors, different typefaces, and varying font sizes, a clear hierarchy of information was established within the instruction set. Figure 1 shows the H1 headings that were presented in larger red text and the body content that was displayed using smaller blue text. Bolding and italics were also used to create additional levels within the hierarchy.

2. White Space

White space was used throughout the website to break up large chunks of text and avoid overcrowding of information and images. Further, it was used to highlight important information by making it stand out from the rest of the text (Golombisky & Hagen, 2010). The use of ample white space created a visually appealing layout that satisfied the reader and effectively displayed the information.

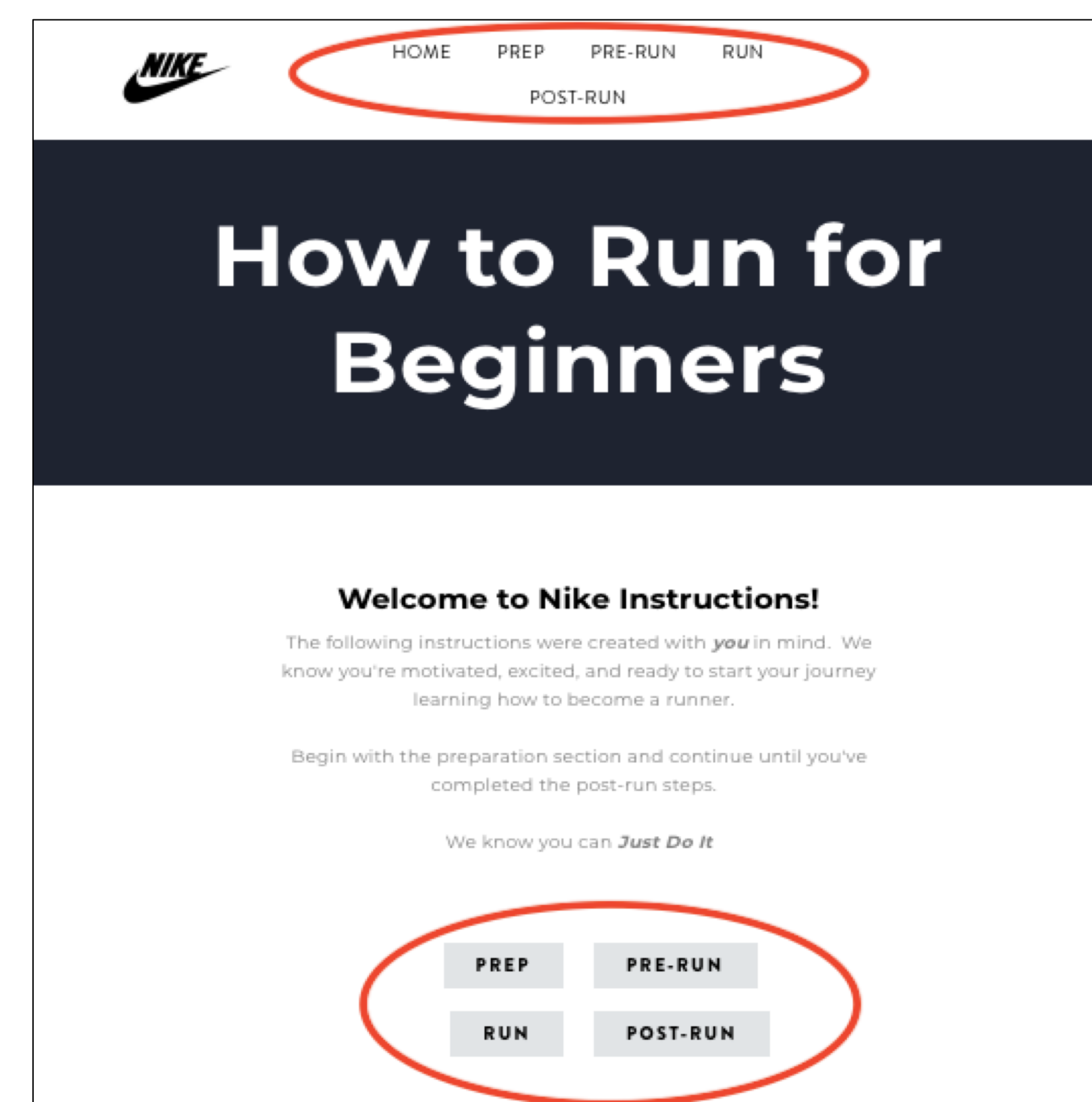


Figure 2. Dual navigation shown on the website homepage.

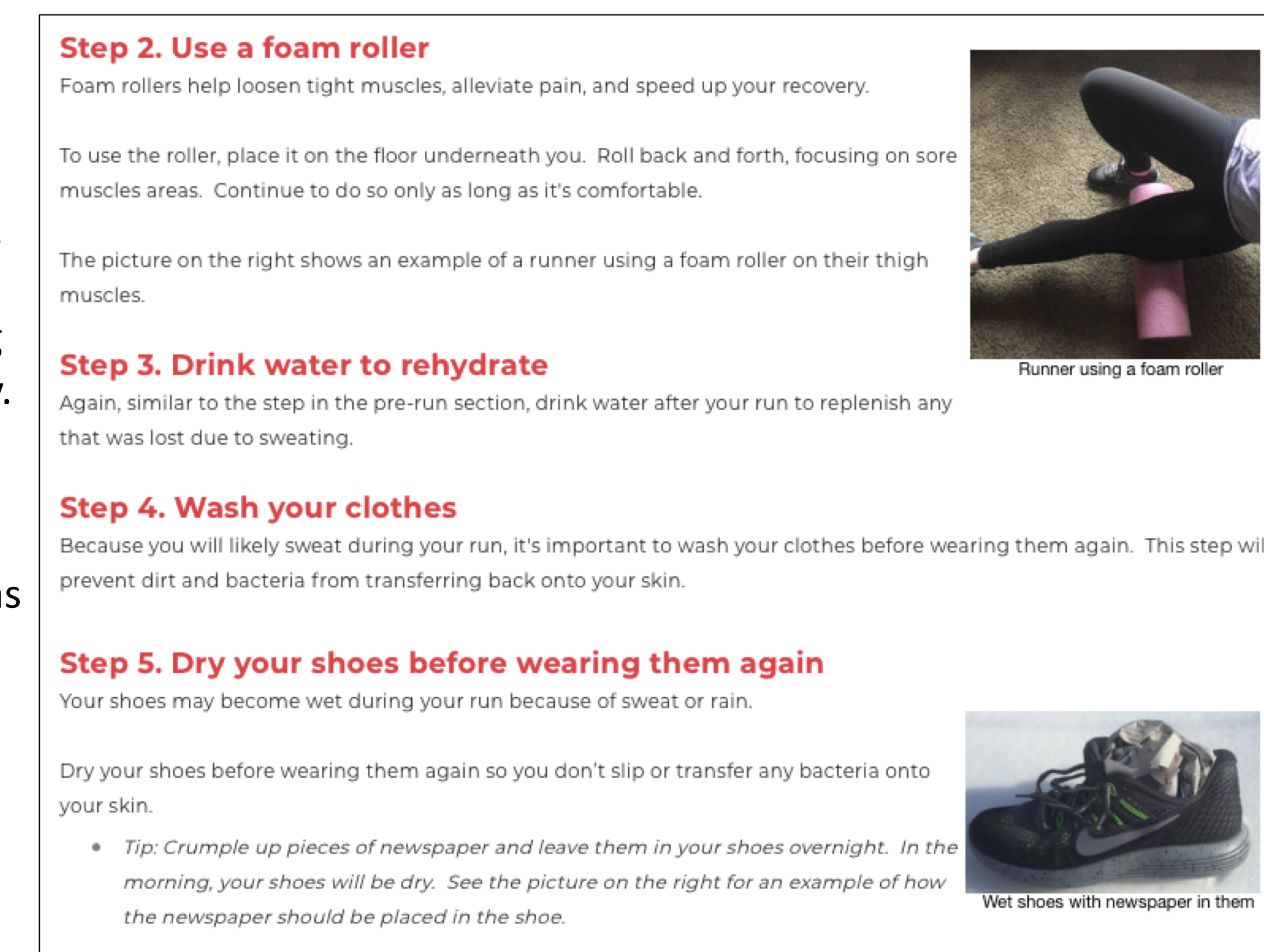


Figure 1. Information hierarchy and inclusion of several images.

3. Balance of Content and Images

Establishing a balance of text and images was essential for maintaining an effective document. Images help clarify information presented in the text. According to previous literature, Italy contains a high-context culture. This means that those within the Italian culture value non-verbal forms of communication. The use of images aided this preference and was important for the effective communication of information (Würtz, 2005).

4. Navigation

The website was created with a dual navigation to aid its usability. Clear and consistent navigation appeared on both the top and bottom of the website, providing users with multiple ways to change pages. As a result, users don't need to scroll to either the top or bottom of the page they are currently on. This helps establish clear transitions from one set of information to another.

Conclusion

Usability Testing & Revision

After creating the instruction set and developing the website, the first draft was submitted to the Italian students for usability testing.

I conducted the usability testing in the form of a survey and the participants used think-out-aloud protocol as they read through the instructions. Think-out-loud protocol is a technique used to gather information during testing about whatever the user is thinking (Barnum, 2010). This strategy helps locate issues that may not have otherwise been uncovered.

The results of the usability testing highlighted both strengths and weaknesses of the instructions website. A prominent request was to add more images. This request seemed in line with the high-context culture in Italy that places a value on non-verbal communication cues. Figure 1 shows a page with two images as opposed to one.

Discussion

There are several key discoveries that were made as a result of completing this cross-cultural instructions project.

- Establishing clear communication as soon as possible with cross-cultural partners is essential to creating an effective product in a timely manner.
- Images support comprehension when text alone fails to provide adequate information. Adding effective images is especially important for audiences in high-context cultures.
- Usability testing is important to achieve separation from the document so that you can make meaningful changes.

Website URL

<https://writ3562winstructions.weebly.com>

References

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